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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TUNIS 000008

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUMHUPPS](#) [KDEM](#) [TSPL](#) [TS](#)  
SUBJECT: TUNISIA'S ACTING MINISTER OF COMMUNICATIONS  
SUGGESTS "FRANK AND UNINHIBITED DISCUSSIONS" TO IMPROVE THE  
BILATERAL RELATIONSHIP

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Classified By: Ambassador Gordon Gray for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

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Summary  
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¶1. (C) Acting Minister of Communications Oussama Romdhani told the Ambassador on January 5 that although the U.S. and Tunisia have had a strong bilateral relationship for a long time, it had become "more uneven over the last decade." Romdhani, who served for nearly fifteen years at the Tunisian Embassy in Washington, suggested that "frank and uninhibited" discussions could improve the bilateral relationship. The Ambassador agreed, suggesting that the Government of Tunisia (GOT) and the USG resume the dialogue on human rights issues initiated during Lorne Craner's tenure as DRL Assistant Secretary. Romdhani spoke highly of Craner but said that any human rights dialogue needed to take place in the "proper framework;" his main concern was public criticism of GOT practices. The Ambassador also advocated expanding bilateral cooperation, citing the emphasis in the President's Cairo speech on science and technology and on entrepreneurship as two mutually beneficial areas. Romdhani welcomed the idea of working together in the two fields but did not offer any specific ideas. End summary.

¶2. (C) Frankness and cordiality marked the 75-minute one-on-one meeting. Over and above his responsibilities as the Acting Minister of Communications, Romdhani is the long-serving Director General of the Tunisian Agency of External Communications; he is also President Ben Ali's preferred translator in bilateral meetings. In addition to his service at the Tunisian Embassy in Washington, Romdhani studied in the United States. At the end of the meeting, he offered himself as a sounding board should the Ambassador need another channel of communications (although he carefully worded the suggestion to respect the Foreign Minister's prerogatives).

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Bilateral Relationship  
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¶3. (C) Romdhani suggested the meeting, which came amid other GOT efforts to improve the tenor of the bilateral relationship. Replying to the Ambassador's question about the state of bilateral relations, Romdhani said that the traditionally very friendly relationship had become "more uneven over the last decade." He attributed the erosion to certain elements in the previous Administration who, he claimed, preferred public posturing to achieving results. (Romdhani cited as an example the GOT's surprise and dismay at being grouped with North Korea in a White House statement on media freedom.) Continuing, he suggested that Tunisia is often taken for granted because it is a relatively small and stable country, with no serious crises. Romdhani thought

that the election of a new Administration provided the opportunity for reviving the relationship, and said that when he visited the U.S. last spring he had perceived a sense of "optimism in the air." He also spoke highly of the President's June 4 speech in Cairo.

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Human Rights Dialogue  
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¶4. (C) The Acting Minister thought that "frank and uninhibited discussions" could improve the bilateral relationship. The Ambassador agreed, suggesting that the GOT and the USG resume the dialogue on human rights issues initiated by then-DRL Assistant Secretary Craner. Romdhani spoke highly of Craner but said that any human rights dialogue needed to take place in the "proper framework;" he did not elaborate, although he used the same expression more than once during the discussion.

¶5. (C) Comment: Not surprisingly, given his responsibilities within the GOT, Romdhani's main concern was public criticism of GOT practices. He praised the manner in which Craner had conducted the human rights dialogue. End comment.

¶6. (C) Citing Tunisia's record of social and economic accomplishments, the Ambassador asked why the GOT had not shown more confidence during the October elections, and in particular why it had not allowed opposition parties to freely select their own candidates. Romdhani replied with a long and legalistic defense of the GOT's actions and accused Najib Chebbi (the leader of the independent Progressive Democratic Party) of being an anti-Semitic leftist who was now trying to curry favor with Islamists to succeed.

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Bilateral Cooperation  
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¶7. (C) Shifting back to the bilateral relationship, the Ambassador noted the discrepancy between the historical reservoir of good will between the two countries, on one hand, and, on the other hand, the relative lack of engagement. Citing the emphasis in the President's Cairo speech on science and technology cooperation and on entrepreneurship, the Ambassador suggested that these two mutually beneficial areas provide fertile ground for enhanced cooperation. At the same time, he noted that the GOT still had not ratified the science and technology agreement the two countries signed in 2004. Romdhani welcomed the idea of working together on science and technology and entrepreneurship but did not offer any specific ideas. When the Ambassador highlighted the upcoming visit of Science Envoy Dr. Elias Zerhouni, Romdhani asked if the Minister of Higher Education was aware of the visit; he appeared to make mental notes on the visit and the GOT's failure to ratify the science and technology agreement.

GRAY